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SUBJECT: SHI'A POLITICAL MOVEMENTS IN SAUDI ARABIA'S  
EASTERN PROVINCE (C-CT7-00989)

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[C](#). 08 RIYADH 1283

Classified By: CG JOHN KINCANNON FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

[1](#)1. (S/NF) SUMMARY: The Shi'a of the Eastern Province (EP) - located primarily in the oases of Qatif and al-Ahsa - comprise the vast majority of the Saudi Shi'a, the largest minority in the Kingdom. With strong socio-religious ties to Iran, and residing on lands holding one quarter of the world's oil reserves, the EP Shi'a are a community of much more importance to regional stability and politics than their population size - some 1.5 million people - might suggest. In the face of the historical legacy and current reality of discrimination by a Nejd-dominated Saudi culture, the EP Shi'a have responded by developing dynamic political structures that, among other roles, represent community interests in dialogue with the SAG and tie the community to other regional movements (Ref A). This cable documents Post's current understanding of the most influential organizations in the Saudi Shi'a community, their religious and political leaders, their goals and ideals relative to one another, and their ties to actors in the region, particularly Iraq and Iran. END SUMMARY.

[1](#)2. (S/NF) This report is the product of numerous conversations with contacts throughout the Shi'a community of Saudi Arabia. Most information comes from self-identified members of the Islahiyyah Movement, although Post has also had several direct meetings with various members of what this report has termed "non-aligned" groups. Post has not had direct contact with any self-identified leaders of Saudi Hizbollah, although Post has had contact with Sheikhs and community actors who enjoy close relationships with Saudi Hizbollah.

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----- The Politically Active -----  
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The Reform or Islahiyyah Movement  
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A Brief History  
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[1](#)3. (S/NF) In 1975, Sheikh Hassan al-Saffar, with the help of leading Eastern Province personalities such as Sheikh Tawfiq al-Saif and his brother Sheikh Fawzi al-Saif, founded the Islamic Revolution Organization (IRO), a Saudi-focused

political movement that advocated overthrowing the Saudi monarchy and using Islam to fundamentally alter culture and society. The IRO had close ties to the Movement of the Vanguards' Missionaries (MVM, or Harakat al-risaliyin al-tala' in Arabic), founded in 1968 in Karbala and seen as the second organized Shi'a political movement in the Gulf, after the Da'wa party. As we understand it, the IRO was a Saudi-focused group under the umbrella of the MVM, both organizations following the religious leadership of Sayyid Muhammad al-Shirazi. In addition to advocating for the general politicization of Shi'ism in the EP, al-Saffar and other IRO imams played a key role in agitating for the brief EP Shi'a uprising of November 1979 which followed on the heels of the Iranian Revolution, giving fiery speeches calling for followers to rise up in protest. Soon after these EP protests, Sheikh Hassan al-Saffar, Sheikh Tawfiq al-Saif and others fled the Kingdom and sought refuge in Iran.

¶4. (S/NF) Many IRO members who remained in Saudi Arabia were arrested and faced alleged torture in the Saudi prison system. In the mid-1980s, in response to this SAG crackdown, some IRO members began to adopt the theory of "wilayat al-faqih," in which a country is led by a single religious figure, and accepted the religious leadership of Iranian leader and Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Ruhollah al-Khomeini. Most IRO leaders continued loyal to Shirazi and rejected this shifting of perspective. These IRO leaders instead moved in a completely different direction relative to those advocating closer ties with Iran. Al-Saffar proposed in a 1985 IRO meeting the adoption of a more moderate agenda, changing the

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IRO from a revolutionary to a reform-minded organization. Though the proposal was not adopted in 1985 due to fears of provoking the MVM and IRO members still in Saudi Arabia, the movement had begun to change to the course that defines its modern-day agenda. After a 1987 event in which a large number of Iranian pilgrims were killed in Mecca, King Fahd sought to release tensions and issued a general amnesty to Shi'a political prisoners in the EP, largely IRO members. The 1988 ceasefire between Iran and Iraq and the Gulf War of 1990-91 further changed regional political dynamics and encouraged the IRO along the path of reform, rather than revolution.

¶5. (S/NF) As a result of this new moderation, as well as deteriorating relationships with Iranian political leaders, the IRO lost any welcome in Iran and members and operations moved to Syria in the late-1980s. In 1991, the organization led by Sheikh Hassan al-Saffar and other like-minded sheikhs officially changed its name from the IRO to the Reform Movement (Islahiyyah). The group also broke from its association with the MVM, deciding to seek improved economic conditions, respect for human rights, and greater transparency in exchange for recognition of the authority of the Saudi state. The Reform Movement's new moderation began to pay dividends in improved dialogue and increased contact with the Saudi regime, and in 1993 an important accord was reached. Meeting with King Fahd and high-ranking princes in Jeddah, Reform Movement leaders Tawfiq al-Saif, Jafar al-Shayeb, Isa al-Muzel, and Sadeq al-Jubran negotiated an agreement to allow all exiled Shi'a - including those not affiliated with the Reform Movement - to return to the Kingdom. King Fahd also agreed to address economic disparities, increase religious rights, undo previously enforced travel bans, and resolve the issue of Shi'a mosques and husseiniyyas. Though this accommodating sentiment angered hard-line Shi'a, it gained the widespread approval of non-ideological Saudi Shi'a hopeful of a better day-to-day existence. When the exiled Islahiyyah leaders returned to Saudi Arabia after the accord, they were received with widespread community support, and this dominant position within the community continues until this day. This dominant position has eroded to a degree, however, by what is seen as a lack of commitment over the last 15 years by the SAG to the

terms of the 1993 agreement; for example, the continued community perception of religious discrimination and economic disadvantage.

#### The Islahiyyah Movement Today

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¶16. (S/NF) The Reform (Islahiyyah) Movement in 2008 continues committed to largely the same ideals that it advocated in 1993, working with the Saudi government and SAG institutions in pursuit of economic equality, greater religious freedom, increased community participation in governance, and observance of human rights. The still largely Islamist Islahiyyah Movement has also shown that it is committed to the principals of non-violence and the promotion of the status of women. The organization's religious-political leader remains Sheikh Hassan al-Saffar, regarded as the most influential Shi'a leader in the Eastern Province. Sheikh Saffar has been a prominent participant in King Abdullah's National Dialogue Initiative, participated in the June Mecca Conference on Interfaith Dialogue, and was the only Saudi Shi'a to participate in July's Madrid Conference on Interfaith Dialogue. Other influential names in the organization include Tawfiq al-Saif, Jafar al-Shayeb, Isa al-Muzel and Mohammad al Mahfoudh of Qatif, and Sadeq al-Jubran in al-Ahsa. One indication of the Reform Movement's continued commitment to working with the SAG regime is the participation by Movement leaders in the Qatif municipal council elections. The Islahiyyah movement agrees with the idea of increased representational governance, one of their primary differences with Saudi Hizbollah, which advocates the idea of "wilayet al-faqih" or rule by a supreme clerical leader. The Reformists dominated the 2005 municipal council elections, with all Qatif seats won by candidates having some affiliation to the Islahiyyah movement.

¶17. (S/NF) With the 2001 death of MVM/IRO/Islahiyyah religious leader Sayyid Muhammad al-Shirazi, a new "marja," or source of emulation, was sought. Both Shirazi's brother and son attempted to assume leadership of his followers, but after a

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period of flux neither was successful in fully assuming his mantle. The influential role played by Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Ali al-Sistani in Iraq post-2003 generated great popularity in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province. The Reform Movement leadership gravitated to him. Although the relationship to a "marja" is significantly less important today than it was in previous decades - particularly among the internationally-exposed and very moderate Islamist leadership of the Movement - the Islahiyyah Movement continues to subscribe to the leadership of al-Sistani reflecting a political evolution away from activist Ayatollahs such as Shirazi to a much closer identification with Shi'a religious "quietism."

¶18. (S/NF) Major Ayatollahs of Iraq and Iran have many official representatives (known as wakeels) in Saudi Arabia, with different representatives having different ranges of proxy powers, depending on their seniority and religious pedigree; among the authorities exercised by a representative or "wakeel" is collection of khums (the one-fifth of income paid by Shi'a to religious authorities), certification of religious rites, and resolution of disputes. Though Sheikh Hassan al-Saffar is a "wakeel" for Ayatollah al-Sistani, community sources report that the highest ranking "wakeel" for al-Sistani is Sayyid Ali al-Nasr of Dammam. Despite al-Saffar being likely the most powerful political figure in the Shi'a community of Saudi Arabia, the largely apolitical al-Nasr is the higher-ranking religious authority.

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Saudi Hizbollah  
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¶19. (S/NF) In response to the killing of Iranian pilgrims in

Mecca in 1987, as well as the increasingly moderate message of the IRO and the distancing of that organization from the Iranian regime, a group of more-radical EP Shi'a who were strong supporters of the Iranian republic took shape. The group claimed responsibility for a series of small explosions in Jubail and Juaymah in the EP in early 1988, and began calling itself Saudi Hizbollah, or "Hizbollah al-Hijaz," somewhat confusingly referencing the region located in the west of Saudi Arabia. Four members of the group were involved in a conflict with security forces in the summer of 1988 and were subsequently executed, only further radicalizing the community. Saudi Hizbollah - despite exiled Hizbollahis using the accord negotiated by the Islahiyyah leaders to return to Saudi Arabia - denounced the efforts of the Reform Movement to seek compromise with the SAG, describing this moderation as surrender. Contacts have widely reported that Hizbollah continued to advocate the idea of opposition and armed insurrection throughout the course of the 1980s and 1990s. The 1996 al-Khobar Towers bombing has been linked to a small group of Shi'a affiliated with Saudi Hizbollah, nine of whom remain today in Saudi prison. The ultimate political responsibility for the al-Khobar Towers bombing remains a hotly debated topic in the intelligence community and the memoirs of different American political leaders of that era. Many Saudi Shi'a attribute the al-Khobar attack to al-Qaida, a view that has little evidence to support it.

¶10. (S/NF) Activists in the Saudi Shi'a community report that in its current form, Saudi Hizbollah has largely ended its support of armed insurrection and goal of overthrowing the Saudi regime, and today functions mainly as a social and religious organizational force. Seen almost unanimously as the second most influential organization in the Saudi Shi'a community, the group is described as strong in its opposition to perceived abuses of the SAG, more aggressive in its rhetoric, and unabashedly closer socially and religiously to the leadership of Iran. The political ties of Saudi Hizbollah to Iran remain unclear. Although gaining reliable information on this shadowy organization is difficult, Saudi Hizbollah appears currently more committed to its Saudi identity and willing to work with the SAG. Hizbollah principals have engaged in public dialogue with the SAG, even going as far as to participate at the invitation of the SAG in the Saudi National Dialogue. Clearly the political ideas of Saudi Hizbollah are influenced by overarching organizational ties to Iran, but the nature of the organization's current ties to Iran are unclear to us, with most Post contacts arguing it is minimal.

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¶11. (S/NF) According to most Shi'a community activists, Saudi Hizbollah no longer seeks the overthrow of the Saudi government. The only contrary information we have on this topic comes from ex-political activist turned leading human rights advocate Ibrahim al-Mugaiteeb (strictly protect). Al-Mugaiteeb, who enjoys close ties to both Reform Movement and Saudi Hizbollah members, believes that Hizbollah continues arming itself today with Iranian agents recruiting Saudi Shi'a through a base of operations in Medina. Per his account, these Shi'a are then indoctrinated and trained in Iran and Syria before being redeployed in Saudi Arabia. Al-Mugaiteeb, who claimed in summer of 2008 to have been offered a chance to visit Tehran for meetings with the Iranian regime including the Revolutionary Guard, states that Hizbollah's movement is not one of the masses, but rather one of an ideologically committed and well-trained minority ready to strike when called upon.

Saudi Hizbollah Leadership  
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¶12. (S/NF) Although contacts have reported that people following different marjas comprise the ranks of Saudi Hizbollah, the leadership and vast majority of Hizbollahis

follow the religious leadership of Ayatollah Sayyid Ali al-Khamenei and believe in the principal of "wilayet al-faqih." The highest ranking "wakeel" of al-Khamenei in the Kingdom is reported to be Abdulhadi al-Fadali, a former professor at Jeddah's King Abdul Aziz University said to be in his 70s and in very poor health. Al-Fadali, who actually received his religious education in Najaf rather than Iran, is seen by contacts as likely the highest ranking Shi'a religious scholar in all of Saudi Arabia. Due to the respect for his religious authority, though he is a primarily apolitical figure, he is seen as an important part - and even described by some as the "leader" - of Saudi Hizbollah. This is in contrast to al-Sistani "wakeel" Sayyid Ali al-Nasr, who does not seem to play as influential a role in the political sphere, perhaps emulating the "quietism" sometimes ascribed to al-Sistani.

¶13. (S/NF) With al-Fadali in very poor physical health, there are reportedly quiet community discussions as to who will become the next head "wakeel" for al-Khamenei. Community insiders report this seems to be a race between two Saudi Hizbollah leaders, Sheikh Hassan al-Nimr and Sheikh Abdulkareem al-Hubayl, both of Qatif. The appointment of either to the position of primary "wakeel" would be a significant development considering each man's close ties to the political history and social organization of Saudi Hizbollah. Hassan al-Nimr, wealthier and widely considered the stronger religious scholar, seems to be the favorite. However, his status has recently taken a hit in the eyes of many due to the claims by his brother, Sheikh Jafar al-Nimr, that after years of research, the family has determined they are descendents of the Prophet Muhammad. Having not revealed the research involved in this determination, many have chided the claim, including al-Hubayl and his supporters. For example, prominent Hizbollahi Sheikh Kamal al-Hassan of Safwa, a town in the Qatif area, recently spoke out publicly against Hassan al-Nimr and his family's claims. Sheikh Hashim al-Shakhs is widely identified as a high-ranking political leader in Saudi Hizbollah, while Hussein al-Aish of al-Ahsa has also been identified by rasid.com manager Hussain al-Alaq (strictly protect) as a high-ranking Hizbollah religious figure.

¶14. (S/NF) Many Qateefis report that the "rising star" among Saudi Shi'a religious figures is Sheikh Munir al-Khabaz. During the past several years, Al-Khabaz has drawn crowds for his Ashura sermons exceeded in size only by those of Sheikh Hassan al-Saffar, and is often described as a primarily apolitical religious scholar. The majority of Saudi Shi'a community activists describe al-Khabaz as conservative, although human rights activist Ibrahim al-Mugaiteeb (strictly protect) has asserted to us that al-Khabaz is in fact a high-ranking Hizbollah religious figure. This is not a claim that has been echoed by other contacts, but one firmly supported by al-Mugaiteeb.

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The "Non-Aligned" Groups

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¶15. (S/NF) Given the clear supremacy of the Islahiyyah and Hizbollah political organizations within the Saudi Shi'a community, this report has chosen to group other politically active organizations under the heading of "non-aligned" groups. This is not a classification given to these groups by the EP Shi'a community, and the term does not imply any coordination between "non-aligned" organizations. This term is simply an attempt by Post to express divergence from the two dominant political movements. Further, these groups have varying degrees of organizational structure, and are generally much less defined relative to the two dominant groups. For this reason, these groupings are open to greater interpretation of where lines should be drawn and what qualifies as a "group" rather than simply a sheikh or small



number of activists following similar ideas.

¶16. (S/NF) With the death in 2001 of Sayyid Muhammad al-Shirazi, the leadership of the Islahiyyah Movement chose to follow al-Sistani as marja. This was not the case for all previous IRO/Islahiyyah figures, however. Many chose to follow the leadership of Shirazi's brother, Sayyid Sadeq al-Shirazi, a more typical evolution of the transfer of religious emulation, often highly determined by family ties. Most of these figures remain relatively close in ideology to the Reform Movement, and Hussain al-Alaq has identified Yusif Salman al-Mahdi as a prominent follower of Sayyid Sadeq. Al-Mahdi still enjoys close ties to al-Saffar, though he supposedly follows al-Shirazi.

¶17. (S/NF) In addition to al-Sistani and Sayyid Sadeq al-Shirazi, with the death of Sayyid Muhammad al-Shirazi other members of the former IRO/Islahiyyah line chose to follow the leadership of Muhammad Taqi al-Mudarrisi, a Karbala-based religious leader. Al-Mudarrisi had been the chief political leader of the MVM under the religious guidance of Sayyid Muhammad al-Shirazi, and is known for being one of the founders of the Islamic Action Organization in Iraq. A leading "wakeel" for al-Mudarrisi is Qatif sheikh Mohammad al-Habib, someone described as having significantly more authority in the community than the more polemic and recently discussed Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr who is also aligned with Mudarrisi. Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr, of no close relation to Hizbollah leader Sheikh Hassan al-Nimr, has garnered wide media attention over the past months due to his strong calls for Shi'a rights and closer ties to Iran (Ref B, C).

¶18. (S/NF) A group often classified by the name of their regular social gathering or "diwaniya" is the Diwaniyat al-Qatif group. Contacts describe this group as primarily comprised of the previous generation's leadership and the aristocracy of the Qatif community which has largely been marginalized by the active and organized political organizations of Islahiyyah and Hizbollah. Prominent names include Sheikh Abdullah al-Khunaizi, Sheikh Hussain al-Bayyat and Sheikh Samir al-Bayyat, and certain members of the al-Jishi and al-Awami families. Contacts portray this former "Qatifi royalty" as trying to reinsert itself in the politics of the day after years of relative aloofness, with an interest in reviving the previous authority of their families. This group has political views largely in line with the goals and ideas of the Islahiyyah Movement, but views the Islahis as political "arrivistes" without their blue-blood pedigree. They also disagree with the Islahiyya movement's tactics, for example their use of mass media for publicity. Some contacts have described popular sheikh Munir al-Khabaz as affiliated with this group.

¶19. (S/NF) Shi'a liberals make up a group small in number and influence, with no religious base to spread their message. The most prominent member of this group is likely Najeeb al-Khunaizi, who organizes regular forums in his basement that are well-attended by up to 100 guests of varied political backgrounds. Thanks to the intellectual packaging of its ideas and arguments for things such as a constitutional monarchy, the group - whose members often had ties to the now defunct Communist movement in Saudi Arabia - often garners more international media than its local profile merits.

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Shirazi: How it is Used, What it Means

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¶20. (S/NF) The analysis of Western governments with regards to the Saudi Shi'a community often imprecisely uses the term "Shirazi" to describe the dominant political movement within the EP that is more properly described in our view as the Islahiyyah Movement. The misuse of this term is often

perpetuated by a casual employment of the word by members of the Shi'a community itself. The fundamental reference of the term "Shirazi" is to those people who followed the religious leadership of Sayyid Muhammad al-Shirazi, who died in 2001. Al-Shirazi was a prolific Islamic jurist who EP Shi'a followers describe as having been one of the first religious progressives, a leader who advocated the use of human understanding (ijtihad) to further the guidance of the Qu'ran. He is also notable for his application of religious principles to modern studies in politics and economics, and his advocacy for freedom of expression, tolerance and political plurality. Though he espoused non-violence, some of his followers, particularly those in Iraq led by Muhammad Taqi al-Mudarrisi, have at times advocated violence for political purposes.

¶21. (S/NF) Given the complicated organizational evolution of the MVM, IRO and Islahiyyah Movement, and the subsequent further splitting of the followers of al-Shirazi upon the Ayatollah's death into the camps of three different marjas (al-Sistani, al-Mudarissi and Sadeq al-Shirazi), using the term "Shirazi" to describe a person's affiliation today is not useful. For example, Hassan al-Saffar is often described as the leader of the "Shirazis." Nimr al-Nimr, though, is also defined as a Shirazi, as he evolved out of the MVM movement. Sheikh al-Saffar is strongly committed to working with the Saudi regime, denounces the use of violence, and takes great pains to separate himself from linkage to the Iranian regime. Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr refuses to renounce violence, has publicly justified the use of foreign forces to protect EP Shi'a interests, ominously warns of clashes, and takes every opportunity to denounce the SAG. Yet, though the two are diametrically opposed in current political ideals and religious guidance, they are both "Shirazis" due to their previous following of Sayyid Muhammad al-Shirazi. In our view, the term "Shirazi" should be used only in a historical context to refer to someone previously affiliated with the umbrella of Sayyid Muhammad al-Shiraz. This term has little meaning in defining current political or religious tendencies.

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----- The Politically Inactive -----  
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¶22. (S/NF) Often described as traditionalists, there is also a significant portion of the EP Shi'a community that does not participate actively in political dialogue or movements, rejecting politics in favor of a view that supports the ideas of "taqiyya," or dissimulation - distancing oneself from association with corrupt rulers not appointed by a rightful Imam - and "intizar," or waiting for the return of the Mahdi as prescribed by Shi'a religious belief. Jafar al-Shayeb, a leading Islahiyyah figure describes the traditionalists as being made up of both Akhbaris and Usulis. Akhbaris are those leaders who reject the idea of "ijtihad" or reasoning in the creation of new laws, and instead only believe in the Qu'ran and hadeeth as sources of instruction. Akhbaris are particularly prominent in Bahrain. Usuli is a term that encompasses all Shi'a who accept the authority of qualified religious leaders to use reasoning in creation of law, and includes the vast majority of Shi'a in the world. Al-Shayeb uses the term Usuli to refer specifically to those EP Shi'a who accept reasoning as part of Islamic jurisprudence, but continue to believe in "taqiyya" and "intizar." Though these politically inactive ideologies have largely been marginalized by the dynamic efforts over the past four decades of the active political movements, some Post contacts describe growth in the influence of these traditionalists thanks to a perceived lack of progress in the politicking of the more governmentally-active Shi'a political and religious figures.

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COMMENT  
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¶23. (S/NF) Documenting the political machinations of the Saudi Shi'a is difficult given the hyper-politicization of the community, and the secrecy with which the community carries out much of its political activity due to the historical suspicions of the SAG toward Shi'a political organizing. This cable endeavors to spell out Post's best - although certainly not complete or incontrovertible - understanding of the political make-up of the EP Shi'a community today.

¶24. (S/NF) USG engagement of the Saudi Shi'a community is also of great importance. Several of the Reform Movement's top political leaders - including Jafar al-Shayeb and Isa al-Muzel - are U.S.-educated, and even more are Western-educated. Sheikh Hassan al-Saffar's own son and nephew study at a university in Iowa. Nearly all Reform Movement leaders express an interest to work with the USG on promoting our shared core values. Many prominent Saudi Shi'a, however, encounter significant difficulties when applying for U.S. visas due to information included in visa watch lists - good, bad, and otherwise - that the SAG has provided to the USG. While the USG certainly has an interest in continuing to monitor and understand all facets of the Saudi Shi'a community, we believe opportunities exist in the future to facilitate greater travel by Saudi Shi'a leaders and their families to the United States. The USG goal should be to help empower those Saudi Shi'a leaders that seek to work closely with the SAG in creating a stronger Saudi state and to further marginalize leaders who advocate violence, radicalization, or foreign interference by Iran.

(APPROVED:JKINCANNON)  
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